

Exploring Intercultural Competence Among Students in Malaysian Campuses

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about intercultural competence in the academic literature, yet our present knowledge of the subject matter was vastly drawn from the most prominent views of the Western scholars. Accordingly, many calls have been made to reconsider the predominantly defined concept in different cultural contexts, particularly in the Southeast Asia region such as Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to explore how the local undergraduate students of various ethnicities reflect on their everyday experience within the context of Malaysian campuses. In this study, the pyramid model of intercultural competence developed by Deardorff in 2006 is used to examine the students' experiences with their foreign friends and their sensemaking of intercultural competence. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with selected undergraduate students from three universities in the Northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. The research identified two important themes: establishing connection and developing communicative skills. The findings contribute into re-consideration of Deardorff's model. While the model emphasizes more on psychological factors, the findings indicate that language proficiency is viewed as an important factor in the process of interaction between local students and their foreign counterparts. The implication of this study highlights the idea that students' ability to develop language and communication skills will allow them to be more intercultural competent. This study adds Malaysian perspective to the current understanding of intercultural competence.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, intercultural experience, interaction, Western perspective, Malaysian perspective.*

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of diversity in today's globalized era calls for people with different cultural identities to be able to adapt, live and co-exist harmoniously with one another. With such needs, people must find ways to interact effectively and appropriately with others who speak different languages and uphold different values. To rest naturally and mindfully within this awareness, intercultural competence becomes a powerful tool that enables people to move beyond their differences (Lahey & Canary, 2012). It is obvious that the need for addressing intercultural competence is not only crucial in the United States but also other countries around the world. In a pluralistic society such as Malaysia, in the latest Malaysian Education Blue Print (Higher Education) 2015-2025, the ministry aspires to create an education system that produces graduates who are well-equipped with essential skills such as communication to succeed in the global environment. As such, it is timely for researchers to explore how intercultural competence is perceived within the Malaysian universities setting.

Probing into intercultural competence, we discovered that much has been written about this construct in the academic literature. Yet, the current understanding of intercultural competence was vastly drawn from the Western scholars' perspectives (Yep,

2014). New developments of intercultural communication have indicated calls for more perspectives on intercultural competence of people from other cultures, particularly within the Asian region (see, for example, Asante, Miike & Yin, 2014; Chen, 1993; Dalib, Harun & Yusof, 2014; Xiao & Chen, 2009; Yum, 2012; Halim, Bakar & Mohamad, 2018). Looking into Malaysia's cultural mosaic, Tamam (2015) has claimed that the research of intercultural competence is still underdeveloped. To echo Tamam (2015), we found an apparent shortfall on the perspectives of the literature in Malaysia. For example, the *Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (2009) is claimed to be the first comprehensive volume that provides an overview of complex intercultural competence and brings together diverse cultural voices, notwithstanding the perspective of multicultural Malaysia. Withal, the latest publication of *The Global Intercultural Communication Reader* (2014) which is a collection of 32 essays has claimed to be the first anthology to take a distinctly non-Eurocentric approach on intercultural communication, likewise, did not include perspectives from Malaysia.

As Malaysian (local) researchers, we have a deep need to contribute to the body of scholarly research on intercultural competence. For this reason, our paper aims to explore and present a Malaysian perspective on intercultural competence. Specifically, with reference to Deardorff's work (2004, 2006), we seek to investigate how the local students make sense of intercultural competence based on their own experiences with international students in the campus.

CONCEPTUALIZING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The term "intercultural competence" is not only diverse in its definitions, but also a manifold of terminologies (see Bennett, 2009). Despite such diversity, the notions of effectiveness and appropriateness form the fundamental concept of intercultural competence (Liu, 2012). Effectiveness is referred to as the effect of setting successful goals and it is closely related to satisfaction, in which both reveal the same effect such as the attainment of desired outcomes (Parks, 1994). Appropriateness is "the avoidance of violating social or interpersonal norms, rules, or expectations" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p.7). Lustig and Koester (2010) have indicated that a communicator needs to identify the rules of a given situation to achieve appropriate communication. In addition to the criterion of appropriateness and effectiveness, motivation, knowledge, and skills are the most common components of intercultural competence although scholars do not always label their models precisely with these terms (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Bakar, Halim, Mustaffa, & Mohamad, 2016).

Given the diverse definitions of intercultural competence, Deardorff's (2004, 2006) study is useful to illuminate a foundational understanding of this construct. Deardorff's study has attempted to provide the key foundational components of intercultural competence and the definition has been agreed upon among intercultural experts in the United States. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) have claimed that Deardorff's study is one of the relatively few efforts to identify the components of intercultural competence which has illustrated the use of both quantitative and qualitative processes, and the first study to document consensus among leading intercultural experts. Through the use and application of grounded theory, Deardorff has deliberately withheld all pre-existing concepts and asked twenty-one experts (who are nationally known scholars in the United States) on the question "What constitutes intercultural competence?" in order to allow definitions to emerge from the experts themselves. Based on the data generated from a Delphi study, the experts have reached a consensus on the definition of intercultural competence as "the

ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2004; p.194). Deardorff (2006) has further explained her research study through a pyramid model which visualizes intercultural competence in five important elements, namely, attitude, knowledge, skills, internal and external outcomes (Figure 1).

The model views attitude (openness, respect, curiosity and discovery) as foundational to the development of one’s knowledge and skills. One’s knowledge is manifested through one’s ability to acquire cultural self-awareness, cultural specific information, cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic awareness. While skills (observing, listening, evaluating, interpreting and relating) emphasize on one’s ability to process knowledge about one’s own culture and other cultures. The internal and external outcomes represent distinctive elements of the model. The internal outcomes and external outcomes are the resulting element of an individual’s attitude, knowledge and skills.

These outcomes are expressed based on the individual’s ability to acquire flexibility, adaptability, ethno relative view, and empathy which will then lead him or her to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations.

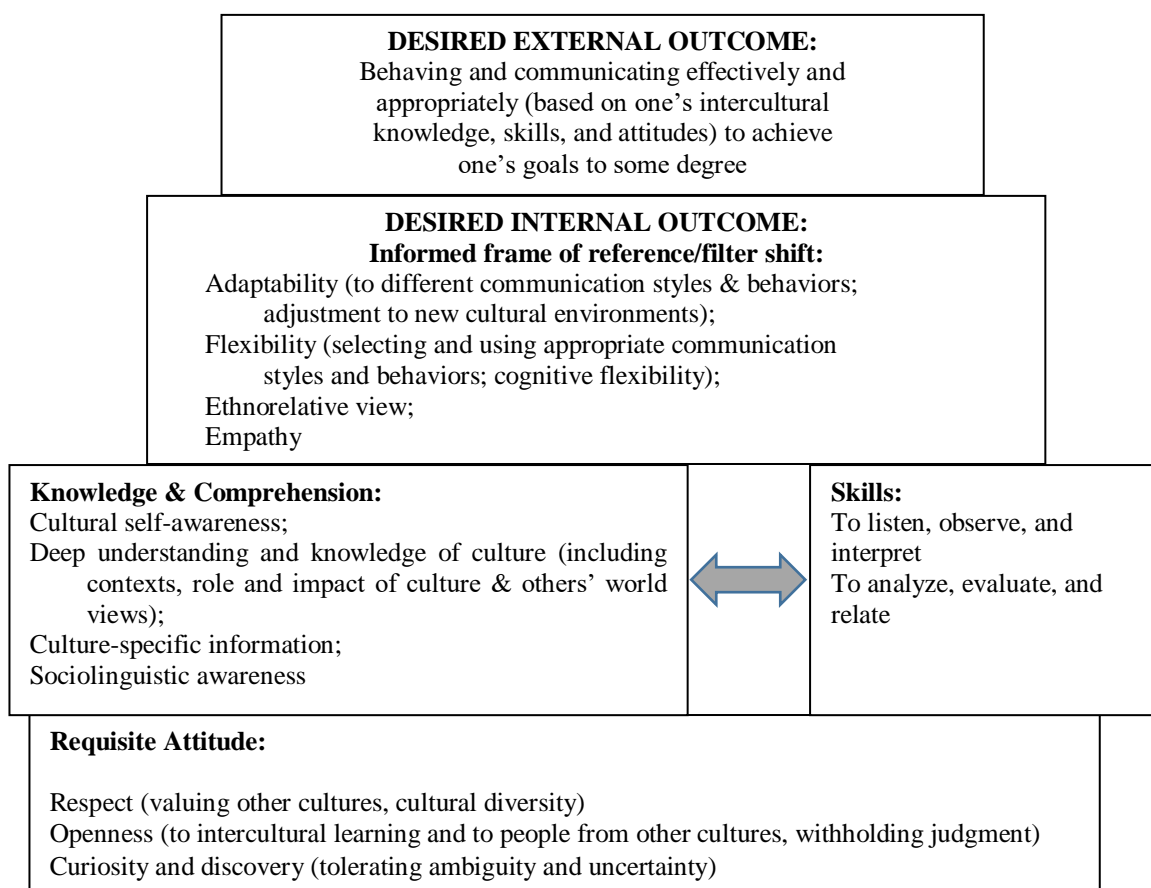


Figure 1: Pyramid model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).

REVISITING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN MALAYSIA

Our examination on the current literature indicates that most, if not all, local intercultural competence researches (although researchers may not precisely adopt similar labels) tend to engage in theory-validation research (e.g., Pandian, 2008; Ramalu, Rose, Kumar, & Uli,

2010; Ramalu, Rose, Uli, & Kumar, 2010; Abu Bakar, Mohamad, Halim, Subramaniam & Choo, 2018). Given that, little is known as to whether the researchers' tendency toward the 'validation' of intercultural competence knowledge and theories through the Western lens, can help us to make sense of the intercultural competence that reflects the multicultural environment such as Malaysia. Nonetheless, such assertion does not mean discounting the efforts and values of Western scholars. Rather, it brings to the fore the importance of the need to re-consider the already-existing Western based body of knowledge. It is imperative for the Malaysian researchers—we included—to be reminded of the implications of researchers' cultural context(s) into their studies. In view of this, we feel much need for addressing particular elements of intercultural competence that is nested in our cultural layers which might have been overlooked in the West but pertinent to our context.

While Deardorff's model can still be useful for the exploration of intercultural competence, Deardorff has advised caution that her work represents the U.S. perspective. In view of this, much of the issue of competence in the Western context deals with psychological factors, behaviours and communication rules (Fantini, 2009; Byram, 1997). In the vibrant multicultural and multilingual context of Malaysia, a recent study has indicated that while there are common elements of intercultural competence in the Western model, language factor seems to be prominent (Dalib, Harun & Yusof, 2017). Dalib, Harun and Yusof's (2017) study have proposed necessary prerequisite for intercultural competence which is the ability to communicate across linguistic differences. This ability suggests that individuals "need not only make themselves understood through language but also they need to use language that is generally understood in relating with one another" (p.18). Nonetheless, Dalib, Harun and Yusof (2017) have maintained that language alone does not guarantee effective and appropriate communication. The need for competency also underscores the importance for attitude, knowledge, and skills of culturally different individuals engaging interactions with one another.

Whilst the attestation of new elements for intercultural competence in Dalib, Harun and Yusof's (2017) research study, it focuses only on international students within the context of a Malaysian campus. Given that, most studies of intercultural competence (although researchers may not use similar label) in the Malaysian campuses tend to focus on international students (e.g., Ahmad, Ali, Salman & Mohamed Saleh, 2016; Ahmad, Salleh, Mohamad & Sannusi, 2017; Dalib, Harun & Yusof, 2017; Pandian, 2008; Pawanteh, 2015; Rokis, Mat Zain, Yusuf, 2017; Wahab, 2017), we however feel there is much need to probe into the local students' experiences with the international students. Studying the local students has allowed us to respond to the latest Malaysian Education Blue Print (Higher Education) 2015-2025 which aims to produce more holistic (local) graduates with the necessary robust communication skills to prepare them for a global environment. This specific communication skill is not only needed for the students to function effectively in diverse cultures, but also to maintain strong employability in today's job market. In line with this, the following research question guides our inquiry:

How do students reflect on intercultural competence based on their everyday experiences?

METHODOLOGY

Given that, the inclination of previous studies towards the exploration of intercultural competence in Malaysia focused only within a local campus (e.g., Ahmad, Salleh, Mohamad & Sannusi, 2017; Dalib, Harun & Yusof, 2017; Pandian, 2008; Wahab, 2017); therefore, we contend that more Malaysian campuses should be explored for a richer knowledge of this construct. Since the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia has made calls for public universities to incorporate soft skills to their students (Roselina, 2009), we also feel there is a need to respond to the calls by focusing our exploration of intercultural competence within the Malaysian public universities. Considering the limited number of published studies from the Northern region of Malaysia, we feel it is pertinent to explore this specific region. Given that the region consists of three different states, we have chosen prominent public universities to represent each state. Thus, three public universities were included in the study.

We used in-depth interviews which involved local undergraduate students as participants. These participants represent the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese and Indian). The study utilized purposive sampling to identify potential respondents. For this reason, we established three important criteria for participant selection. First, participants are Malaysian undergraduate students who have been in the campus for at least two semesters. This criterion indicates a reasonable duration of experience within the campus in which the students might have developed social networks. Second, these Malaysian students must have some experience engaging with other students, particularly, international students. Since face-to-face interaction is an important condition for our interviews (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012), we believe that this criterion indicates that students are likely to experience intercultural interaction on a daily basis. Third, the students must be able to provide and describe actual situations rather than giving hypothetical situations. In other words, local students are required to narrate each encounter with international students as they experienced it.

We asked the assistance from instructors who teach undergraduate courses in the three universities to locate potential participants. Several participants are volunteers for the international office in their respective campuses. As student volunteers, they are involved in assisting the newly arrived international students. This platform provides the local students with opportunities to interact with the international students. Other participants have reported that their engagement with the international students occurs mostly in classes, in which they identify the international students as their classmates. Some have the experience of working with the international students in group assignments.

We used open-ended protocols to elicit as much information as possible from the participants (Patton, 2002). Each interview lasted between 30 to 40 minutes and included questions that elicit details of events or actions from the perspectives of the participants' experiences. We recorded the interview using a digital audio recorder upon participants' consent. The in-depth interviews were conducted in English. However, some participants felt more comfortable speaking in Malay language (the official language of Malaysia). In such case, we preceded the interview with the preferred language. We constructed the interview questions based on Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence. However, since language and cultural factors are the focus of our study, we directed our questions toward exploring it. During the interviews, we first asked participants to provide some understanding of their ethnic/cultural backgrounds. Then, we asked participants to

reflect on their experiences with the international students and recount situations that provide them some insights on language and cultural differences/similarities they have experienced. To facilitate the interactions of participants to reflect on intercultural competence, we have included a question, such as, “Given what you have said about your experience, what is helpful in achieving good communication?”

Our purposive sampling resulted in the interview of thirteen participants specifically in each of the three ethnicities, three Chinese, three Indians and seven Malays. Notably, the participants are non-native English speakers with diverse language/ethnic backgrounds. Every participant was labelled with a number and their statements were quoted accordingly in the analysis. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of our participants.

Table 1: In-depth interview participants.

Participant	Ethnicity	Program	Semester	Gender
1 (P1)	Chinese	Communication	7	Female
2 (P2)	Indian	Communication	7	Female
3 (P3)	Malay	Communication	7	Male
4 (P4)	Malay	Communication	3	Male
5 (P5)	Malay	Communication	2	Female
6 (P6)	Indian	Management studies	7	Female
7 (P7)	Chinese	Finance	7	Female
8 (P8)	Malay	Chemistry	7	Male
9 (P9)	Malay	Multimedia	6	Female
10 (P10)	Malay	Multimedia	6	Male
11 (P11)	Malay	New Media Communication	2	Female
12 (P12)	Chinese	New Media Communication	2	Female
13 (P13)	Indian	New Media Communication	2	Male

We transcribed and analysed all sessions of the interview using the thematic analysis technique. The theme for every question was coded by applying the ‘semantic thematic analysis’ technique as proposed by Janis (1965). Following the aims of the study and Janis (1956), we performed conceptual thematic analysis by providing a description of the relationship between the themes identified. The unit of analysis for this study was sequence of sentences or complete dialogue related to feelings, attitudes, and reactions of the participants’ experiences. When transcribing the interviews, we retained each participant’s words as much as possible. However, when verbatim impedes understanding, necessary editing was done to ensure appropriate comprehension of the participants’ statements. We used NVivo 10 qualitative data software in managing our data analysis.

FINDINGS

The data analysis showed two themes that illuminate the participants' experiences (i) language ability (ii) language strategies. The following description further illustrates each of the two themes that reflects their perspective on intercultural competence.

Theme 1: Establishing Connection

Data analysis showed that the participants' experiences seemed to center on the need to establish connection with others through language. Given that, participants viewed language as an important enabler to connect with people and provides a better understanding of others. Since English is a common lingua franca of intercultural interaction in this region, participants' interactions with the international students are mostly centered on this medium. Some participants indicated successful interactions in which they did not have much problem interacting with the international students despite their level of English proficiency. However, participants reported challenges and need to overcome the difficulties of strong accents that require patience. In other occurrences, inevitably the absence of language proficiency creates a co-barrier. Accordingly, participants felt that it is important to overcome such challenges and compensate for a lack of one's language ability. For example, Participant 5 shared her experience in assisting the Japanese and Korean students in her campus. She noticed they had difficulties "to get their messages across" which made it hard for her to engage smooth interaction. To cope with such situation, she showed empathy for their struggles through the use of very basic phrases at a level appropriate to the language in the interaction. Consider her experience (R = Researcher, P = Participant):

- R: Do you have any problem in your interaction with the international students?
- P5: Yeah language barrier of course... that's an issue especially Japanese students, and maybe Korean students. Thailand students as well. But they are really friendly. They really tried so hard to get their messages across especially when they need help because sometimes when you want to help them you don't understand what they are trying to say.
- R: So how do you cope with such limitations?
- P5: I asked one word... what is this word, maybe trying to like combine them, and like what are they trying to say. They can understand basic English but you have to really go slow and like, listen properly and be patient.
- R: So how do you feel about the interaction? Do you feel like...I just don't want to...you know...
- P5: "*Menyusahkan*" (troubling) like that? Hmm... Not really, because if I were to put my place like them, like if I was in their place, I will have a hard time and imagine doing exchange in another country for like six months and don't know anything, so...of course I try my best to help.

Participant 4 explained similar experience and acknowledged the importance of understanding the international students' limited language ability:

P4: We cannot expect them (international students) to be very good in English. So sometimes you might have to draw something just to make sure that they understand you.

R: How do you work through language barrier?

P4: Well, I mean like the word that I used. You have to use the basic words so that they can understand. I think that is important...maybe you should use like basic words...short sentences so they can understand you well.

Participant 8 commented on the need not only to understand the international students' language ability, but also one's own ability. Reflecting on his experience, he felt that language proficiency may not be a concern in interaction. Rather, it is important for both parties to invest as much effort as they can to "understand each other":

There are challenges when I talk to the international students. They cannot speak fluently in English. I know that my English is not that fluent too but both of us try to speak. As long as we can understand each other, it's okay. If we do not understand, we can repeat what we say.

Participant 10 shared his similar difficult experience concerning "taking time to understand one another":

It is hard to understand their accent (international students). They speak fast and they speak with accent. When I talk to them face-to-face, I have to look closely to their lips. I said "Okay, you repeat slowly". They will try to speak slowly. It is difficult sometimes when I have to ask them to repeat many times but finally we can understand each other. We both want to be understood when talking to one another.

Theme 2: Developing Communicative Skills

Reflecting on the participant's experience of linguistic and cultural diversity instigate them to realize the importance of developing communication skills especially when English is used as a lingua franca between non-natives English speakers in the campus. Communication skills are manifested in participants' interaction as well as their ability to reduce cross-cultural misunderstandings through communication strategy. For example, Participant 9 (Malay) shared her experience with the Chinese international students in the campus. To overcome the language barrier, she asked her friends (Malaysian Chinese) who speak the students' language (Mandarin) to help her to interact with them. Apart from learning some basic Mandarin words and phrases, she also used written (English) words that need to pass through the translation process via their mobile dictionary application apart from:

- R: What kind of challenges have you faced with international students?
P9: Language...English language. Most of them cannot speak good English. Even sometimes when I use google translate, they still cannot understand.
R: So how do you interact?
P9: I have to call my Malaysian Chinese friends to help.
R: If you do not have Malaysian Chinese friends, how do you interact? Do you write and tell them?
P9: We use handphones.... their handphones, not mine. I write in English and then they translate to Chinese (language).
R: Do you remember what you write?
P9: No...normally I write full sentence... like “what is your name”?
R: They do not understand that?
P9: No... fortunately, I have a list of their names so I just follow the list.
R: How do you feel? Do you feel not wanting to speak to Chinese students anymore?
P9: At first, I do feel that way but I am a buddy to international students. Sometimes I have to deal with Chinese students who do not understand English... so they will use their handphones... find the words in their dictionary and then translate the words.
R: Using dictionary...
P9: Yes. It was slow because I have to wait for them. They need to type up each word.
R: Do you like your experience?
P9: If I want to say I like it, not really because it takes time. Sometimes a long time. Since I sincerely want to help, I just be patient...
R: How do you improve your interaction? Do you take time to learn Mandarin to help you interact with them?
P9: Oh, yes... yes (laughing)
R: How do you learn Mandarin?
P9: From TV (laughing)
R: What words do you use when interacting with the Chinese international students that you have to assist?
P9: Most often... “nǐ hǎo” (how are you) and “xièxie” (thank you)... simple words.
R: Why do you learn their language even though it is very basic?
P9: I feel it is not fair...I have Chinese and Indian friends who can speak Malay but I am lacking other language.

Participant 10 took the effort to learn other languages. However, he reflected that such necessity occurs only when he sees the other person struggling to speak in English. Apart from spoken language, he also felt that body language is useful in the interaction:

R: *Since you have many international friends, do you learn their language, such as from your Uzbekistan friend?*

P10: *I do not learn his language. His English is good; he speaks clearly not like my Somalian friend. I have to take time to understand him.*

R: *So, how do you deal with the situation?*

P10: *Patience...even though my English is not good, but I keep trying. When I talk to him, I have to repeat two to three times... he can understand. I was also a buddy to Japanese students. I had to pick them up at the airport. Before they landed, I downloaded Japanese language apps. I learned how to greet them. Anyway, before I use their language, I took time to see whether they can speak in English. Then I found out they are not good in English. They look shy to speak. Then, I looked at my apps and from there I can greet them. When they hear that I use their language, they feel happy. Then it is easy for me to make them feel comfortable and talk to me.*

R: *From your experience, what have you learned?*

P10: *I still need to improve my English. This will make it easier for the other person to understand me. Then, body language is also important. We have to show positive body language. If we show negative body language, we portray to the other person that we are not interested. It is hard to communicate.*

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to answer this question: How do local students reflect on intercultural competence based on their everyday experiences? We have identified two important themes: language ability and interlingua strategies.

The first theme is establishing connection which is the essential concern of participants in the process of connecting with others by means of language. In this regard, participants viewed language as the key enabler in interaction which allows them to (dis)connect with the others. Language plays a central role in the ability to interact with others, Lustig and Koester (2010) have asserted that the awareness of this role is heightened when people realized the use of language disconnects them with others. In the case of this study, participants perceived that the primary goal of the interaction is to first establish a connection through a language (primarily English). Within this experience of awareness, the study has shown that participants need to solely rely not only on their ability to speak in a language but also on the ability of others. This finding has shown similar insight to that of Dalib, Harun and Yusof's (2017) study. To further elucidate, the finding has also shown that spoken language seems to be the most visible aspect of participants' competence. This consciousness has led participants to associate competence with the ability to construct sentences in a given language which allows them to send information and understand the message. With such ability, an interaction can become smooth and successful even though participants reported having experienced challenges caused by the accented speech. Despite the notion, it is interesting to note the participants' perception about their ability to effectively sustain interaction with others does not necessarily include a mastery of a language (mainly English). Rather, it considers how participants work through their differences by understanding the different language ability levels of one another. This

understanding is crucial especially in the absence of a speaker competency of a lingua franca (mainly English).

The second theme, developing communicative skills reflects the realities of lingua franca users within the context of multilingual and multicultural Malaysia. In the case of this study, participants managed to find out ways to develop their skills to communicate by using several strategic ways. The strategies, among others, include the use of the written form of language, showing positive body language and taking the effort to learn the language of the other person. This finding corresponds with Liu's (2009) research work on intercultural competence in the context of English as a foreign language in China. Liu has found that non-native English speakers usually adopt their own ways of using the language to interact. Liu has contended that intercultural competence takes into account the ability to see what goes in interaction that requires participants to use language flexibly to negotiate meanings in the process of intercultural interaction. Based on the finding, we concur that participants' ability to formulate strategies indicate the underlying requirement for competency which include attitudes, knowledge and skills of the participants. Deardorff (2006) has attested that attitude is the critical starting point for achieving competence, attitude moves participants to be aware of the challenges in using a foreign language and think about ways to negotiate meanings in their interaction.

The concern of developing one's communication skills through language is worthy of note since English is not native to the participants, nor to the majority of the international students in the campus. The literature has indicated that non-native speakers of English perceive language skills to be more difficult than native speakers (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Yang et al., 2006). As such, people who are struggling with a foreign language are more aware of the source of their difficulties than those speaking their first languages (Byram, 1997). It is evident in the study that participants are aware of their difficulties and have adopted positive attitudes through effective strategies in order to facilitate the interaction. More interestingly, as the finding suggests, the participants have demonstrated interest to learn the language of the other person. This finding correlates with the literature that competence can be assisted by the behaviours which indicate an interest in other languages (Gudykunst, 2003; Lustig & Koester, 2010). Fantini (2009) have contended that one's acquisition of a second communication competence can be manifested through new language learning. Such language learning in turn may reflect one's development of intercultural competence.

The finding of this study points to an interesting insight on effective and appropriate dimensions of intercultural competence. It illustrates that the valued goal (effectiveness) for the participants is making connections. Furthermore, the effectiveness is about one's ability to understand the other person and making themselves understood primarily through a spoken language. While an effectiveness is about reaching understanding of the messages exchanged through a language, appropriateness is about the participants' ability to coordinate behaviours in a given situation. This idea means that appropriateness requires culturally different members to find suitable ways to interact with one another to achieve the intended interactional goals. This finding points to an interesting question for discussion, that is, "what it means to be competent in a multilingual and multicultural setting as in the context of Malaysia?" Since the need for connection and communicative skills was keenly felt by the participants, an important skill for developing competency requires the ability to become mindful of language and cultural differences (Dalib, Harun &

Yusof, 2017; Ting-Toomey, 2015; Halim, Abu Bakar & Mohamad, 2016). Baker (2011) has remarked that when two individuals in interaction are from different cultures speaking a language which is foreign to both of them, there are significant influences on communication that arise from their initial language. Accordingly, competent intercultural participants need to have the awareness of the inherent cultural conventions that give impact on their speech practices. In the case of this study, mindfulness is manifested in the participants' ability only to understand one another's language proficiency but also to be flexible in their interaction by using appropriate language strategies. Taken further, this idea also corresponds with attitude, knowledge, and skills in Deardorff's (2006) model. These components necessitate individuals to develop cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness, openness to cultural differences, and the skills to relate with others.

CONCLUSION

The western scholarship strongly shapes the current understanding on intercultural competence (Yep, 2014). While it is important to embrace such scholarship, there is the need to add our local knowledge of intercultural competence to this scholarship. Since language factor seems to be a taken-for-granted aspect in many western models (Deardorff, 2004, 2006; LaRocco, 2011), our study indicates a strong emphasis on the role of language in intercultural competence. As such, this study contributes to enriching dimensions of intercultural competence in which language can be added as an important component to other skills for achieving intercultural competence. Taken further, we concur that the findings of this study do not only contribute to the understanding of intercultural competence among multilingual speakers in Malaysia. Rather, it can also be applied to other non-western multilingual settings where English is not spoken by the majority of its members.

Since Tamam (2015) has claimed that the current Malaysian literature on intercultural competence is underdeveloped, we hope that our study can contribute to the development of intercultural competence perspectives in the Malaysian setting. Several recommendations can be considered for future researchers. This study has focused on participants' reflection on intercultural competence. Thus, there is a need for future researchers to observe actual intercultural situations. How do participants interact through language with one another? How do participants enact their understanding on the language ability of the other person? How do they devise language strategies? Findings from such research would be beneficial to delineate competent behaviours among multilingual and multicultural speakers. Future researchers may incorporate ethnography to observe the participants in daily situations and respond to important elements of competency within actual interactions. Our study has also focused on face-to-face communication. It is imperative to acknowledge the fact that the spread of new social media worldwide has contributed to the increasing number of intercultural contacts (Chen, 2012). Since many scholars have underscored the significant impact of new social media on intercultural communication (Lebedko, 2014), it is recommended for future researchers to study the role of language in students' engagement with cultural others, for instance, through Facebook. Perhaps, such inquiry may transform our understanding of intercultural competence.

The development of intercultural competence is indispensable within higher learning institutions. We hope that this study will promote more efforts in developing intercultural competence among students in Malaysia. Higher learning institutions must play important

roles in preparing students to learn how to function effectively in the multilingual and multicultural society.

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